

Know Your Faith

The Spirit of Scholars and Mystics

by Christine Allen

Can a mystic be a scholar? In the history of the Catholic Church this question has been answered many times by the lives of women and men who were both scholars and mystics.

Sometimes, today, people wrongly suggest that mystical experience leads a person away from serious study and scholarship.

Another equally false suggestion is that mystical experience leads to the disappearance of individuality because the mystic is lost in God.

The study of the lives of Catholic mystics, however, proves that authentic mystical life leads to a deep desire both to know the world and to serve other people with a heightened awareness of one's own individual gifts to the Christian community.

A mystic is a person who has been given a special gift of the prayer of union with God. A scholar is a person whose intellect has been trained for study, research, writing, and teaching. The following examples will show how many mystics have also been scholars.

In the history of the Catholic Church St. Augustine, the fourth century Bishop of Hippo, stands out as being one of the earliest men to combine mysticism and scholarship. His City of God inspired Charlemagne's establishment of Christian European civilization.

Later, Herrad of Landsberg wrote the first encyclopedia for women entitled The Garden of Delights. This twelfth century Benedictine Abbess combined mystical visions with careful study of philosophy and theology to teach her nuns the truth of Christianity.

At the same time another Benedictine Abbess, Hildegard of Bingen joined mystical union with Christ to a talent for science. She wrote several books on the classification of stones, on the healing capacities of herbs, on the different psychology of women and men, and on the relation of humanity to the world.

This combination of mysticism and science was also found in the writings of the thirteenth century Dominican, St. Albert the Great. His discoveries in natural science led to a new system of classification of animal life.

A student of St. Albert became the most famous man to combine mysticism and scholarship in the Catholic tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest, wrote ^{over 9} ~~several~~ hundred books and taught for years at the University of Paris.

St. Teresa of Avila is probably the most famous woman to combine scholarship and mysticism. This sixteenth century Carmelite author of The Interior Castle became the first woman to be proclaimed "Doctor of the Church."

A friend of St. Teresa's, St. John of the Cross, wrote that the goal of all mystical prayer ought to be the increase of charity. This

view was developed in The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Living Flame of Love, and The Dark Night of the Soul.

Two contemporary scholars and mystics lived out this goal of charity in the shadow of Auschwitz. The Carmelite philosopher Edith Stein and the Franciscan journalist St. Maximillian Kolbe gave their lives for their neighbors in the holocaust of the concentration camp.

Finally, North America has examples of Catholics who combined mysticism and scholarship. Sr. Marie of the Incarnation, the seventeenth century foundress of the Ursulines in Quebec, wrote dictionaries and catechisms in several native languages.

Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk from Gethsemane, Kentucky, dedicated his life to make the eremitical and contemplative tradition accessible to the general American public.

From all of these examples it can be seen that authentic mystical life, or true union with Christ in prayer, can release women and men into a wonderful variety of vocations. Christian mystics have been philosophers, historians, scientists, teachers, reformers, poets, theologians, linguists, and journalists.

Even more, many Christian mystics have also achieved the height of perfection by sacrificing their lives for others. In this way, mystics have not only been scholars, but also saints.